The Birth of a Japanese Theology

(Preface to "On Japanese Mission Theology")

I. From Imitation to Creation – The Maturing of Theology in Japan

Since Christianity took root in the West two millennia ago, theology has developed as a rational system of thought.
Greek speculation, Roman legalism, Latin scholastic order, and the Protestant emphasis on individual faith—all formed its foundation.
Yet, though claiming universality, Western theology has always been written in the language of Western culture; it is profoundly local while speaking as if it were global.

When this theology was transplanted into Japan, the Japanese began, quite naturally, with imitation.
Seminaries translated Western textbooks; students learned to think in foreign categories—sermons, apologetics, and doctrines framed in Western logic.
But imitation never lasts long in Japan.
Within imitation itself, a quiet uneasiness began to stir:
"Why do these words not move our hearts? Why does the God of the Bible feel distant from the people of this land?"
That uneasiness was the first cry of what would later become a **Japanese theology**.

II. Suppression and Explosion – The Spiritual Energy Born of Tokugawa Silence

The peace of the Tokugawa era ended warfare and bloodshed, but it also confined the human drive to challenge and to grow.

For over two centuries, Japan lived in a state of creative repression—refining craft, discipline, and sensitivity within limits that could not yet be broken.
When the gates opened, that pent-up energy burst outward with astonishing force.

During the Meiji period, Japan absorbed the flood of Western civilization.
Yet it did not swallow it whole; instead, it digested, improved, and reconstructed it.
Railways, education, military systems, even religion—everything was "Japanized" through craftsmanship and adaptation.
Japanese creativity has always been a reaction to external pressure—an inward energy turning outward.
That same pattern must also apply to theology.

III. Revivalism and Pseudo-Christianity – When a Silent Religion Began to Speak

The so-called "Restoration Shinto" led by Hirata Atsutane and others was not truly a return to ancient purity,
but rather a **creative reconstruction** born out of deep spiritual hunger.
Dissatisfied with a voiceless and impersonal Shinto, they introduced ideas of a *personal God*, *creation*, and *salvation history*—concepts clearly influenced by Christian theology.

This was not mere imitation but a profound response.
It marked the moment when **the silent religion of Japan began to speak**.
When the wordless kami met the speaking God of Christianity, something new was born between them—
the earliest seed of a Japanese theology, not by fusion, but by revelation within encounter.

IV. The End of Imitation – Theology as Craftsmanship

Importing Western theology was a necessary stage.
But a people who live forever on borrowed thought remain perpetual disciples.
The Japanese are, at heart, craftsmen.
A craftsman does not simply receive what is good—he polishes, refines, and improves it until it fits human life more perfectly.

Theology, too, is a form of craftsmanship.
Doctrine is the raw material, Scripture the tool, and humanity the workshop.
When the Japanese begin this spiritual labor, **a Japanese theology is born**—not by theory, but by the act of shaping truth into life.

V. The Japanese Soul – Rediscovering the Image of God

The spiritual temperament of the Japanese is rooted in awe toward nature and in the desire for harmony.
This is not idolatry but an instinctive openness to the revelation of the Creator.
In biblical language, it is *"the law written on the heart,"*
akin to what Paul called *"the law of the Spirit."*

Thus, the Japanese have long valued not the law inscribed on stone, but the **law that resonates within**—
the echo of God's image impressed upon the human spirit.
Here lies the intersection between biblical universality and Japanese particularity:
faith as the rediscovery of what it means to be created *in the likeness of God*.

VI. The Mission of Japanese Theology – A Gift to the World

“Japanese theology” is not a theology for Japanese alone.
It is a **spiritual dialogue partner** for Western theology,
a doorway through which humanity may rediscover the divine image within itself.

While Western theology has centered on sin and redemption,
Japanese theology will center on creation and relationship—
on the restoration of God’s image rather than on the condemnation of its loss.
It is, in essence, **a theology that lifts people up rather than judges them down**.

VII. Conclusion – A Theology Born from Silence

Japan has long been a silent land.
Yet within that silence, God has been speaking—
in the wind, the insects’ song, the sound of flowing water.
People have sensed the divine not in words, but in presence.

Now that silence has found its voice.
This is **the birth of a Japanese theology**:
from imitation to creation, from silence to word, from law to spirit.

When Japanese faith walks this full path,
it will no longer be a local or ethnic theology,
but **a theology of humanity created in the image of God.**